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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

4 February 1986

EL SALVADOR: A NET ASSESSMENT OF THE WAR

Summary

Improvements in the capabilities and performance of the Salvadoran armed forces--in large measure possible because of continuing US economic, military, and logistical assistance--have significantly dimmed rebel military prospects in the last two years and allowed the Salvadoran armed forces to take the military initiative. In particular, the government increasingly has turned to small-unit tactics and combined air-ground assaults to combat the rebels, who themselves are now focusing on small-unit operations, economic sabotage, mining, and terrorism. []

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Despite these improvements, we do not believe a decisive defeat of the guerrillas is likely in the next two years. Moreover, in our judgment, continued government progress against a resilient and flexible foe will remain gradual and costly. []

[] the rebels by no means see their cause as lost, and believe that sabotage, mining, and terrorism, over time, will offset the widening numerical and material advantages of the Salvadoran armed forces, drive a wedge between civilian and military authorities, provoke a right-wing backlash, and further batter the economy. As such, we believe the government will remain particularly vulnerable to acts of urban terrorism and economic sabotage that have the potential to undermine--or at the very least slow--Salvadoran democratization efforts. []

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We see no prospect that San Salvador can wean itself from its economic and military dependence on the United States in the next two years. For their part, the rebels are intent on raising the cost of US support by continuing to target US Embassy and military personnel. Rebel strategy appears to be formulated with an eye toward the 1988 US election period in hopes that public and US Congressional support for the Salvadoran Government will wane. []

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This typescript was prepared by the Central American North Branch, ALA. []

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[] It was coordinated with the Directorate of Operations.

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Questions and comments are welcomed and should be addressed to Chief, Middle America/Caribbean Division, ALA, []

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THE SALVADORAN MILITARY

In our judgment, the changed military balance between government troops and the insurgents is in part a result of the improved capabilities and responsiveness of the Salvadoran military, now numbering some 51,000 men. In particular, the military--as a result of strong continuing US financial, material, logistical, and advisory support--can point to a number of notable improvements:

--In addition to expanding troop strength by 60 percent in the last two years, the armed forces have made significant strides in improving the quality and scope of their training, [REDACTED]

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--Tightened command and control by a more confident and competent high command as well as the expanded strength of the armed forces has reinforced morale and institutional cohesiveness already improved by earlier reorganizations, according to [REDACTED] US Embassy sources. Each of the six military brigades, for example, now has its own counterinsurgency force capable of breaking down into smaller units and operating independently in the field. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] while the use of combat paramedics and medevac helicopters has reduced the number of soldiers killed in action.

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--In our judgment, the gradual strengthening of the Air Force has been a critical factor in enabling the government to pursue new and more effective strategies. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] air power has been vital in rescuing besieged government units and contributes to rebel disorganization, declining morale, and poor performance.

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--These factors--as well as the provision of better equipment--have allowed the military high command to shift tactics. The armed forces gradually has abandoned its traditional garrison mentality in favor of small-unit tactics, night ambushes, and combined air-ground assaults that have put the insurgents on the military defensive. [REDACTED]

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Despite these significant improvements, the Salvadoran military continues to be plagued by problems that, in our judgment, hamper its ability to make dramatic military gains against the insurgents. [REDACTED] US Embassy, and [REDACTED]

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--The tradition of rewarding loyalty and longevity with promotion to senior positions continues to weaken leadership and undermine accountability.

--The military continues to be hurt by periodic tactical breakdowns. In particular, some field commanders remain reluctant to engage in small-unit operations and night ambushes while others fail to follow operational plans or properly deploy their troops.

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--The uneven development of the Navy and the security forces--the National Police, Treasury Police, and National Guard--also works against the implementation of a more comprehensive anti-insurgency strategy. The US Embassy, for example, has noted that the security forces in the capital are to effectively curb terrorism. [REDACTED]

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THE INSURGENTS

The weight of reporting from [REDACTED] the US Embassy and [REDACTED]

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Although the rebels remain a resilient and credible foe, they have lost the tactical initiative in the military struggle. Overall, we believe guerrilla strength has fallen some 3,000 from a late 1983 peak to a current level of some 7,000 and [REDACTED] the rebels have been hard hit by lowered morale, increased desertions, and a significant decline in material assistance from Cuba and Nicaragua. More specifically:

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--[REDACTED] the military's buildup and the guerrillas' inability to acquire military hardware from outside sources has widened the gap in firepower. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] reduced support to the rebels in part because of US pressure and a belief that the guerrillas no longer were capable of gaining a military victory.

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--[REDACTED] domestic and international support for the insurgency is at an all-time low. We estimate--[REDACTED]

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--that domestic support has fallen from a high of perhaps 15 percent of the population in 1980 to less than five percent. [REDACTED]

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--[REDACTED] declining military fortunes have sharpened leadership rivalries and intensified debates over tactics and strategies. Although the rebels appear to have made some progress toward strengthening their centralized command structure following mid-1985 rebel conferences in Morazan, we believe the weight of evidence continues to indicate that strategic consolidation among factions and widespread cooperation at the field level are a long way off. [REDACTED]

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Despite its weakened military position, we believe the rebel alliance remains a strong and viable force capable of marshalling its resources to carry out a prolonged war. In particular:

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--[REDACTED] despite the heavy toll taken by casualties, desertions, and government captures--the guerrillas continue to maintain a disciplined compartmentalization within and among units regardless of size or functions.

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[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

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--Propaganda front groups, both at home and abroad, continue to generate favorable publicity for the insurgents and promote political agitation. [REDACTED]

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STATUS OF THE WAR

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Rebel leaders publicly claim that theirs is now a war of attrition designed to exact maximum costs on the government while husbanding their reduced resources. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] the guerrillas have adopted this strategy because they recognize they have little near-term chance of achieving victory and because prospects for a favorable negotiated power-sharing arrangement are poor [REDACTED]

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Public statements by guerrilla leaders suggest that they expect to continue fighting indefinitely, and that they are casting an eye toward the 1988 US election period. By that time, [REDACTED] they hope the prospects of a seemingly interminable war will have convinced US public opinion and the Congress to curtail aid to the Salvadoran Government. [REDACTED]

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Rebel Tactics

...In the Countryside: To implement this strategy the guerrillas have turned increasingly to small-unit operations that employ economic sabotage, saturation mining, and hit-and-run assaults on poorly-defended targets in the countryside. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] the widespread use of anti-vehicle and anti-personnel mines and boobytraps have increased the number of Salvadoran Army casualties and hurt troop morale. During the first half of 1985, for example, [REDACTED] nearly 30 percent of its battlefield casualties were a result of mines. In recent months, [REDACTED] account for 14 percent of all military deaths and 47 percent of the wounded. [REDACTED]

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Sabotage also has taken a heavy toll on El Salvador's already battered economy. [REDACTED] during the first six months of 1985, such sabotage attacks increased by more than 550 percent over the same period in 1984. The guerrillas have had considerable success in targeting the nation's electrical grid, telecommunications and other public services, commercial transport, and private agricultural facilities. In January 1986, for example, the guerrillas destroyed nearly 40 electrical pylons causing lengthy blackouts in the capital and throughout much of eastern El Salvador. [REDACTED]

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Sabotage and mining have been complemented by a campaign of rural terrorism. [REDACTED] the insurgents believe terrorist operations will convince the rural population that the government cannot provide security in the countryside. Insurgents destroyed 75 town halls and other non-military public facilities during the first half of 1985, and abducted more than two dozen mayors following the March 1985 elections. In a particularly brutal episode in April 1985, the guerrillas killed 29 men and women in one small town for suspected civil defense activity. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

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...In the Cities: [REDACTED] the insurgents are committed to urban terrorism despite opposition from some non-Marxist elements of the rebel alliance. [REDACTED] the rebels believe that random terrorism will undermine the credibility of the Duarte government, while the targeting of US diplomats and military personnel will force Washington to reduce its presence and support for the Salvadoran Government. In addition, [REDACTED] rebel plans that call for increased political agitation in San Salvador, particularly on the labor front where Marxist-led unions control nearly a third of organized labor. [REDACTED]

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The Government Response

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...In the Countryside: In our judgment, the tactical changes implemented by the armed forces with [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] the use of small-unit operations, night ambushes, and combined air-ground assaults have put the rebels on the defensive. Furthermore, [REDACTED] the military high command recognizes the need for continued organizational and logistical reforms in order to further modernize the armed forces. [REDACTED] for example, that forward patrol bases for elite units operating in rebel areas likely will be introduced to counter reinfiltration by rebel forces of areas swept clean by larger army units. [REDACTED]

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Nevertheless, the long term progress of counterinsurgency programs likely will continue to be incremental. Implementation of the "National Plan"--which is designed to strengthen local government and restore public services to areas secured by the Army--has yet to receive strong public and financial support from President Duarte and the private sector. Although the government continues to pay lip service to civic action programs, budgeted funds for public works and services have declined by about a third during the 1980-85 period. [REDACTED]

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The government also has failed to train and outfit local residents adequately to defend their homes once an area has been secured by the armed forces. [REDACTED] the government fell far short of achieving its 1985 goal of establishing 165 armed civil defense units nationwide. After more than two years in operation, the civil defense program only has 53 units in 262 municipalities, according to US Embassy reporting. The program has been hurt by the reluctance of some field commanders to provide volunteers with arms for fear they will be lost to the rebels. The frequent lack of response by military elements to rebel attacks against civil defense units also hurts the viability of the program, [REDACTED]

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...In the Cities: US Embassy and media reports indicate that the government is improving its internal security apparatus to combat urban terrorist networks [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Official statistics show that more than 40 urban terrorists--among them several guerrilla leaders and two of the triggermen who participated in the June 1985 killings of six US citizens--were arrested in the capital in the last half of 1985. [REDACTED]

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Overall, however, we concur with US Embassy assessments that underscore the government's limited ability to counter rebel urban terrorism. In particular, we believe the generally inadequate training of urban counterinsurgency forces coupled with acute shortages of weapons, radios, and vehicles will continue to leave the government vulnerable to dramatic terrorist acts. [redacted] despite recent government arrests, most rebel factions have an urban apparatus capable of remaining underground until circumstances are favorable for action. [redacted]

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OUTLOOK: CONTINUING CONFLICT

Although we believe the armed forces have made significant improvements since the early 1980s and that popular support for the rebels has dwindled, we do not believe the balance has tipped sufficiently to allow for a definitive resolution of the war during the next two years. Progress in implementing long-range programs such as the National Plan and civil defense--critical, in our judgment, to establishing permanent security in the countryside--are likely to remain gradual and uneven. Moreover, while the government's increasing use of small-unit tactics is likely to keep the rebels on the defensive, such operations are unlikely to produce dramatic victories. [redacted]

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Moreover, we expect the guerrillas will continue to show a tactical ingenuity and flexibility that will permit them to remain a formidable force, capable of taking advantage of the government's many vulnerabilities. In particular, we believe a prolonged campaign of economic sabotage, mining, and terrorism--in conjunction with small-unit operations--has the potential to sow dissension between military and civilian authorities, undermine longer term economic reforms, and sap popular support for the government. At the same time, more dramatic acts such as the kidnapping of President Duarte's daughter or the killing of the US Marines will serve to keep the guerrilla cause in the public eye and contribute to an impression that the insurgents are stronger than they in fact are. [redacted]

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Although we do not foresee a sharp change in the current pattern of the war during the next two years, we cannot discount the possibility that the military situation could turn rapidly in favor of either the government or the insurgents. Dramatic improvements in the performance of the Salvadoran armed forces--probably not possible without sizeable increases in foreign assistance--coupled with a series of tactical blunders by the rebels--thus far not exhibited--could reduce the insurgency to little more than the nuisance value that characterized it during the late 1970s. On the other hand, a prolonged wave of insurgent terrorism and sabotage--perhaps in conjunction with widespread labor disorder--could improve rebel prospects by creating a public impression that the government was losing control. Under this scenario we also would expect to see the establishment of an authentic insurgent army led by a more monolithic command element as well as increased external support for the rebels, perhaps including the introduction and effective use of SA-7 anti-aircraft missiles. [redacted]

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IMPLICATIONS FOR THE US

We see no prospect that the rebels will abandon their attempt to raise the cost of Washington's support for El Salvador. As such, we believe that the insurgents will continue to target US personnel to draw attention to US involvement in El Salvador. At another level, we believe the rebels may calculate that Washington's support for San Salvador--key to the war

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effort--will wane in the face of an extended war of attrition. Although the guerrillas almost certainly do not expect the current US administration to weaken its support for Duarte, we believe they may see some prospect of sharpening domestic debate over Washington's role.

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In our opinion, there is no prospect that the Duarte government will be able to wean itself from its financial dependence on the US during the next two years. US assistance, in our judgment, will remain the critical element in allowing the Salvadoran forces to continue prosecuting the war. At the same time, the Duarte government will continue to look for continuing public and diplomatic approval of both its conduct of the war and its progress toward democracy.

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